The Gift of Abner Grice.

By Robert Barr.

THE tramp leaned over the gate, looking at the trim garden and the homely little one-story cottage. The place was perhaps an acre in extent, and the cottage seemed very small for the size of the grounds.

A little girl approached, looking wonderingly at him, but her shrinking from him caused no resentment in the tramp's mind, for he was used to it. He accosted her in a whining voice:

"Who lives here, little girl?"

"Aunty Mehitable and Aunt Euphemia," she answered, gazing at him with surprise in her eyes, amazed that he asked what every one was supposed to know. Then she ran away as fast as she could, and the tramp, after watching her flight, opened the gate and entered the garden.

The two old ladies were sitting on the veranda when the tramp came around to them, saying he was in search of work, which was not true, and that he was hungry, which was.

The old ladies bustled about to get something for him to eat, and such a dainty little meal as they spread the tramp never sat down to. Then they swayed back and forth in their rocking chairs and gazed at him with a satisfaction no less complete than his own, gratified to think that presently there would be one hungry man less in the world; and they questioned him, one interrupting the other in eagerness to elicit the pathetic story of his life.

Pathetic, indeed, it was, for the man, being utterly unhampered by truth, was thereby enabled to furnish them adorned fiction that went straight to their tender, unworldly hearts. He was a mechanic. He had been thrown out of work through no fault of his own, all on account of hard times. He had tramped and tramped searching for a job, and often, oh, how often, had been tempted to steal; but when about to do so the precepts of his childhood forced themselves on his memory, and he said, "No, I'll starve first." Consequently he starved.

When he sat back unable to eat a morsel more the two women consulted together for a few moments, standing at the end of the veranda and talking in whispers. At last they came forward again, and Miss Mehitable, being presumably the elder, was spokeswoman.

"If you think you could work in the garden," she said, "we might give you something to do. We can't pay much; but you will have plenty to eat, and a comfortable place to sleep in the outhouse. What do you say?"

Now, of all things on earth that the tramp wanted, work was the very last. Still, circumstances over which he had no control, at the present moment, made it strictly necessary that he should lie low for a while, and this spot was about the safest place he could choose; no one would think of looking for him in such a remote corner. He glanced over the peaceful garden and pondered a while before replying.

"Well, mum," he said at last, "I don't so much care about wages as I do about a safe home and good victuals. I'm not a great hand at gardening, being used to city work mostly; but things got a bit lively—that is, trade was dull, and so I thought—well—I'll do my best, if you show me how."

"That is all any one could ask," said the two in the same breath.

"I'd like to get another suit of clothes," he continued, looking down at his torn garments, "but I'd rather not go into the village after them. I've been used so cruelly by folks that I don't exactly care about anybody seeing me but yourselves, and I'd kind of rather nobody knew I was here, if you don't mind."

The sisters looked at each other with pity in their eyes, which said as plainly as words, "See how hard usage warps the kindly nature of an unfortunate man." Aunty Mehitable assured him that he might live entirely by himself and need meet no one. There was an old suit of the gardener's in the outhouse; perhaps that would do for him, and they would pay the gardener for it when he returned in the autumn.

"That'll be just the ticket," replied the man.

"And now what is your name?" she asked.

"Abner Grice," he answered, after a perceptible pause, for the question came upon him unexpectedly and he had trouble in recollecting the name he had fixed upon at the gate.

Thus it was arranged, and Abner Grice worked faithfully and well, with more success than might have been expected; he proved to be an ingenious and most resourceful man. If there was any odd job to do about the cottage, a boiler to mend, a lock to repair, Abner seemed a very magician with tools.

"I know your trade," cried Aunt Euphemia triumphantly, once as she stood watching him expertly soldering a pipe.

"Ah!" gasped Abner with a start; "what is it?"

"You're a plumber."

"Yes, mum," he said with a sign of relief, "you've hit it the first time."

"Now, why couldn't you open a plumbing shop in the village next winter, for there isn't one, although we have waterworks here, and must send to town twelve miles away when there is anything to be done."

"I'd sooner open a bank," muttered Abner.

"What's that?" cried Miss Euphemia in astonishment.

"I mean I haven't the capital, and I suppose a bank wouldn't care to back me up."

"It surely wouldn't take much capital," said Aunt Euphemia.

"More than I've got," remarked Abner, as he finished his task.

Spring blended into summer, and summer was wearing into autumn, but still Abner Grice worked for the two ancient ladies, and ate at their hospitable board, for they had insisted that he should have his meals with them.

In September he told them he thought of leaving them, but they begged him to remain, and he said he would until the other gardener returned.

The two sisters had been having tea at the squire's, for they were welcome guests with rich and poor alike, and over their next meal at home they gossiped about their visit.

"And such a lovely new solid silver tea service the squire has bought," Aunty Mehitable said to Abner, who regarded her silently. "Ah, that is what it is to have money. Goodness knows how much it must have cost! I don't care for gauds or jewels, but I should like to have a tea service like that."

"And so should I," sighed Aunt Euphemia. "Perhaps if we saved up"—

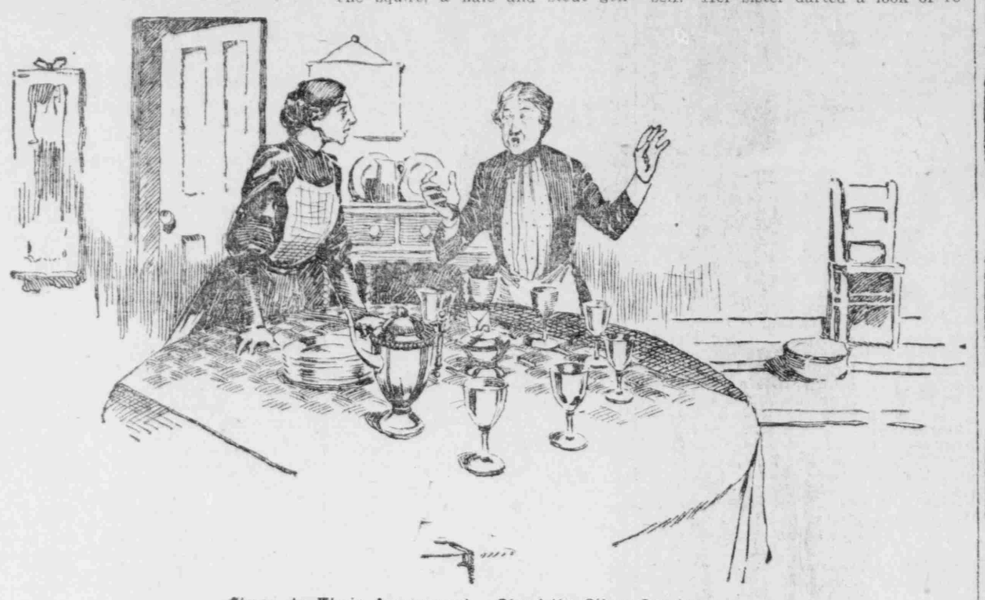
But Aunty Mehitable sorrowfully shook her head.

"We could never, never do it," she replied.

All of which goes to show that we rarely know what good luck awaits us. The charming old ladies were to have their hearts' desire granted when they least expected it, and that right soon.

Every night before they went to bed they carefully locked and barred their doors and securely fastened all their windows, just as if there was untold treasure in the house. In spite of these never-neglected precautions they saw as soon as they got up one morning that their domicile had been entered, although neither of them had heard a sound during the night. There on the table, to their amazement, stood the silver service. In the sugar basin was placed a letter, which Aunty Mehitable took with trembling hands; and, after reading it, she uttered an exclamation of despair and let it flutter to the floor. Aunt Euphemia picked it up, and read it in her turn.

"Dear ladies," it began, continuing with deplorable spelling which need not be recorded here, "you have been good to me, and this is all I can do in return. The squire is rich, and will never miss the service. Keep it dark for a while, for they will never think of looking for it in the cottage, anyhow. You can't give it back, for if you do it will land me in prison, and I know you wouldn't want to do that. I'm a burglar, I am, and a good one, you bet. I've bolted, so you won't see no more of me. It isn't real silver, anyhow, but plate, so the squire deserves to have it pinched. P. S.—I didn't take anything else, 'cause the squire's a friend of yours."



There, to Their Amazement, Stood the Silver Service.

The two old ladies sat down breathless, and began to weep quietly and hopelessly.

"What are we to do?" said Aunt Euphemia at last, leaving decision with the other, as she always did when things came to a crisis.

"We must take the set back at once; that is the first thing to be done. If we delay some innocent man may be arrested."

"Poor Abner," moaned Miss Euphemia, dolefully. "Then they will catch him and put him in prison, perhaps for life."

"No; that will never do. We must save Abner; and, after all, he did it for us. If we give the things back immediately, perhaps they won't do anything to him. We'll beg the squire not to say a word about it."

Miss Euphemia shook her head.

"I'm afraid it's too late for that. Early this morning, when I first awoke, I heard the galloping of a horse, and I looked out to see who it was, for I thought it might be some one going for a doctor, but it was the squire's man on his fastest horse. The police will be there now."

"Who has committed this crime, Euphemia? Whom should the police arrest? Answer me that, and answer it truly," cried the elder sister, with a stern, accusing ring in her voice.

The other laid her head on her arms, resting them on the table, and sobbed without reply. Mehitable rose and paced up and down the room, wringing her hands.

"We have sinned, and we alone. 'Thou shalt not covet.' That is a commandment as strong as 'Thou shalt not steal.' The one is printed in the Good Book in the same size letters as the other, and who are we to judge between the Lord's commandments and say that he intended the breaking of one to be more serious than the breaking of another? We coveted our neighbor's goods and all the evil flowed from that. No one should suffer but ourselves."

"But how can we save Abner?"

"We must save him by committing another sin, and this should be a warning, showing how evil leads to evil. We must carry these things back to the squire and tell him we took them, and abide by the consequences. And there is not so much of a lie about that, for we did take them; it was our coveting that brought them here; you see he says he took nothing else; it was all for us. Then we must tell the squire we took them."

"Oh, oh!" wailed Aunt Euphemia, shrinking from so terrible a confession, but nevertheless admitting, a moment later, the justice of it. "It is only right and just; but will you speak or must I?"

"I spoke first of the tea service last night at supper, so it is I who should say what must be said to Squire Redfern."

"Perhaps you spoke first, sister," murmured Aunt Euphemia, with a deep sigh; "but I am sure I said the most, and I think I was the one who wished we had more money."

"We will go together, and if I break down you must help me. It isn't a question of who is most to blame; we are very likely equally guilty in the sight of the Lord. Now we must tell Abner that we will take the whole sin on our shoulders."

"But Abner is gone. He says 'bolted' in the letter; don't you remember?"

"Oh, I thought he meant his door. We must see at once whether he has gone or not. Come along, sister."

They found Abner fully dressed, but sound asleep on the bed where he had flung himself after his night's work. The morning had crept on him unaware, and he started up and threw himself into a dazed attitude of defense when they came in.

"Ah, aunties both!" he muttered sheepishly when he saw who it was. "I thought it was the police. I've overslept myself; expected to be ten miles away by this time."

"Oh Abner, Abner," cried Aunty Mehitable in anguish. "How could you do such a thing?"

"Well," said Grice dubiously, "it wasn't very easy without the right sort of tools, but I got there just the same, and I could have made a rich haul, but I thought you wouldn't like it."

"How could you think, then, that we would like your taking the silver?"

"'Tain't real silver, and the Squire's rich anyhow. I knew you wouldn't like it, just at first, but then I thought you wouldn't know what to do with the stuff, and so after a while you'd get kind of used to it, and maybe the squire 'ud die, or something like that, and then everything would be all right, don't you see? But I suppose I may as well give myself up, now that I didn't get away, if you won't hide the swag."

"No, you musn't give yourself up. It is all our fault, and not yours, for we not only coveted contrary to the commandment, but we put temptation in the way of a fellow creature, and as you didn't take anything for yourself, you musn't give yourself up. We are going now to the squire, and I am sure nothing will be done to you. You stay here until we come back—if they let us come back, which we don't deserve. But I think the squire will be easy on us for old times' sake."

"Ladies," cried the burglar fervently, "I ain't fit to be on this earth along with you. I'll do whatever you tell me to do, and stay right here till the police come. It won't be any good beggin' the squire, for he'll jug me sure, and everybody'll say he is dead right, but I'll stay where I am till you tell me to go."

The squire, a hale and stout gentleman of 60 or thereabouts, received them in his library. He was visibly perturbed, but brightened as they entered, and greeted them with much cordiality.

"Ah, neighbors!" he cried, "going about doing good with full baskets, I'll warrant. I think I'll become ill some day just to get you to bring nice things to me; indeed, I'm nearly worried into an illness this very day. I've got news that will startle you. I've been robbed; house broken into, burglarized. Such a thing never happened in this village before, which comes of soft-hearted fools encouraging tramps all about the country. Robbed! You wouldn't believe that, now, would you?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Redfern, we believe it. We did it."

"Did what?"

"We broke into your house and stole your silver, and we are very sorry, indeed, indeed we are," and Aunty Mehitable, her voice quavering, groped blindly round with her handkerchief under her veil to wipe away the tears which she could not suppress. Aunt Euphemia, hanging down her head, cried silently in sympathy with her fellow criminal, making no effort to restrain her grief, for she knew such effort would be useless.

"What!" shouted the squire in bewildered amazement, first thinking the ladies had suddenly gone insane, then doubting that he had heard aright. "We saw the silver last evening and hankered after it," continued Aunty Mehitable. "We came at midnight and took it, but we repented this morning; bitterly repented, bitterly, bitterly, and here it is, Mr. Redfern; confession and restitution is all we—"

Aunty Mehitable here broke down completely, unable to speak further; then the two aunties uncovered, each her own basket, and displayed before the astonished eyes of the squire his missing silver plate.

"Oh, aunty, aunty," he stuttered at last, "how little you know this wicked world. Why, the police say it was the work of one of the most expert burglars in the country."

"He was always handy with tools," sighed Aunt Euphemia, forgetting herself. Her sister darted a look of reproach at her, then tremulously to the squire she said:

"It is a very serious matter, Mr. Redfern; I wish you wouldn't laugh."

"How can I help it, aunty? Where did you go after you broke into the kitchen, and how did you open the china closet door, for it was locked this morning and did not show a scratch? And, then, how did you get into the wine cellar? And how could you, whom I have always thought a temperance woman, never tasting anything stronger than tea, select the best bottle I had in my bins, break the neck off it with a neatness I never saw equaled and drink it all? And how you and Miss Euphemia must have staggered as you went across the lawn, not under the weight of the silver, but under the weight of that most potent bottle of wine!"

Here the squire collapsed into his armchair and shook with uncontrolled merriment at the picture he had drawn, while the two women looked at each other with dismay, evidently fearing they had, in some unexplainable way, bungled the confession.

When the squire had partially recovered his composure, he said: "Whom are you shielding, aunty, and how did you come to know of this burglary? What scoundrel has crept his way into your tender and unsophisticated sympathies? You think you are going to reform him, of course, and that people have been hard on him, and all that sort of thing; but nothing will reform such a person except the jail. Where is he hiding?"

After a few minutes the squire was in possession of the whole story—from the time the tramp first appeared famished at the veranda until the last hour when they left him repentant and deeply despondent sitting on his bed in the outhouse—Aunty Mehitable relating, and Aunt Euphemia eagerly interjecting little remarks which told in the curtics later as the narrative continued.

The squire shook his head.

"I don't much believe in the reformation of such characters. It was not contrition that you noticed in him this morning, but the effects of drink. The fellow didn't oversleep himself, tired after an industrious night's work, as you imagine; he threw himself down in drunken stupor, for a bottle of that wine is enough to intoxicate an elephant. As for his alleged desire to become a plumber—well, from burglary to plumbing isn't a mighty advance toward honesty; still it is perhaps a step in the right direction. I'll do my best. I'll enter the noble band of fictionists—for your sake, mind not for his—and will tell the police the silver had been mislaid and has been found again. That will sound fishy enough, but I will send them a nice check for what they have done, and so, perhaps, nothing will be said. Now, I don't believe we shall find the fellow when we go to the outhouse; he'll have made himself very scarce in spite of his promise. Still I'll go over with you and see. Meanwhile this will be a secret between us three."

"You won't be harsh with him, will you, Mr. Redfern?"

"I'll be as mild as new milk—if he's there, which I doubt."

The two ladies with their empty baskets returned to the cottage, and entered in fear and trembling while the squire, a stout stick in his hand, strode to the outhouse. To his surprise, he found Abner Grice still there, sitting on the bed, with his head in his hands (aching, no doubt, thought the squire.)

"Well, you scoundrel, you arrant knave, slinking here under the protection of two innocent, confiding women, when you ought to be wearing striped clothing in prison! What have you to say for yourself, you rascal?"

"Go on, go on," growled Abner, without looking up. "That's the kind of talk I've had a great deal of in my time."

"In your time! Doing time is what you deserve. You thieving loafer, bamboozling two lone women, getting them to stand between you and the consequences of your crime. It is my duty to turn you over to the police. What have you to say against it?"

Abner Grice sprang to his feet, his fists clinched, all the lower animalism of his nature glaring from his bloodshot eyes.

"What have I to say?" he roared. "I have to say that you are a liar! You never would have been standing there

Continued on Page 7.